Women's Councils as Innovative Mechanisms for Enhancing Female Participation in Local Decision-Making

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Abstract: Women's councils in Poland are relatively new, dynamically developing consultative and advisory bodies operating primarily within local government units. Despite the lack of uniform statutory authority in the Polish legal system, their establishment has become an important element of contemporary public participation practices and local equality policy. Women's councils create a platform for dialogue between public administration and social groups representing the interests and needs of women, enabling them to submit opinions, initiatives and recommendations on local policies (Qu 2020). At the same time, the case law of administrative courts points to existing limitations related to the lack of a clear statutory basis, which has prompted legislative work aimed at formally regulating the status of these councils.

In broader terms, this study is a compilation of issues concerning the effectiveness of law and the functioning of extra-legal norms of social action, which together form the institutional environment for the activities of women's councils. The analysis takes into account both legal norms relating to public participation and social, cultural and organisational norms that determine the real ability of women's councils to influence decision-making processes and shape local policies. This approach fits into the methodological framework of participatory governance (Szulc-Wałecka 2025) and the paradigm of cognitive methods examining the interaction between formal law and social practices (Mączyński & Płaszowska 2021).

This paper examines the the role of women's councils in the process of civic participation and addresses the following questions:
1) To what extent do current legal regulations affect the ability of women's councils to operate effectively?
2) What extra-legal social, cultural, organisational and political norms affect the functioning of women's councils?
3) What are the actual competences and forms of activity of women's councils in Polish municipalities and cities?
4) How do women's councils fit into the model of participatory governance at the local level?
5)Are women's councils an effective mechanism for increasing women's participation in public administration decision-making processes?

The research results confirm that women's councils are therefore an important element in the development of new forms of public management and, at the same time, an example of how the effectiveness of law depends on the synergy between legal regulations and non-legal norms functioning in the social sphere.